Film Festival's hip quotient rising

The eighth annual cinematic celebration heads into its second weekend, with more than 20 films slated.

By CHUCK GRAHAM
Citizen Film Critic

This year we knew right away that the Arizona International Film Festival had come of age. On the first screening of the first film on the first night, an anonymous cell phone in the audience started screeching.

What a great atmosphere. The Sundance Film Festival couldn't have done it any better. Next year, every time the lights go down and before the projector fires up, the last words you hear will be "Please turn off your cell phones."

The rest of the weekend found filmgoers scrambling between the downtown Screening Room and the University of Arizona's Gallagher Theater, where 68 separate film events were presented through Sunday. Grand Cinemas 4 also took part, with a screening of "The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit" starring Edward James Olmos, Joe Mantegna, Esai Morales, Clifton Gonzalez Gonzalez and Gregory Sierra.

Festival screenings continue daily through April 24. As always at the Arizona International Film Festival it is the movies themselves, not movie stars, that everyone wants to see. Filmmakers in town for the festival appreciate this attitude.

Most of these burgeoning cinema entrepreneurs had made short films to promote and talk about here. They were eager to assess audience feedback for film projects which were often put together with little more than blood, sweat, tears and credit cards.

"I was an actor, this is my first time as a producer and I love it," said striking blond and business-like Marliese Schneider from Los Angeles, describing her life change from being on the movie set all day to being on the telephone all day.

Her film is the 22-minute "Turkey Cake," a dinner party drama receiving its world premiere here. Schneider wanted to prove as much to herself as to anyone else that she can be a producer. Next stop for her – a full-length feature.

Writer/director Doug Atchison (left) on the set of his first film, "The Pornographer," which had its Arizona premiere last week.

Mick Diener of San Francisco was one of the first-time feature-length film directors, in town with an intriguing story of sun, sand and sex set in the remote Mexican sea coast resort of Yelapa. Made on a budget of less than $10,000, "Which Way, Por Favor?" is as humorous as it is thoughtful.

As writer/director, he tells the story of four gringos searching for themselves in a hedonistic atmosphere where anything goes so long as everyone consents. Diener and his producer, Sarah Feinbloom, doubling as the entire film crew, used a hand-held camera to create some atmospheric scenes that promise much for his future as a director able to get the most out of meager resources.

The all-around best film in this year's narrative feature division of the Reel Frontier competition is "The Pornographer" by first-time writer/director Doug Atchison. This is Atchison's second film festival with "The Pornographer," the first being at Santa Barbara last month.

"I'm not crazy about that title," the energetic director said, right up front. "But it was always the working title, and we never came up with anything I liked better.

"It does attract attention from

REEL IN, continued on 24

Continued from 23

some people, but it turns off others."

Atchison's film is an elaborate psychological study, not an example of pornography. The innocence of Paul, a shy guy caught in the porno trap of renting videos instead of risking rejection by asking someone for a date, is matched by the innocence of Kate. She is the honest young woman Paul chooses to hit on, hoping to convince her to become his first porno film star.

Holding the film together is Craig Wasson as Mr. Spano, the personable businessman and porno film distributor. Wasson is a veteran actor who had the lead role in Brian DePalma's "Body Double" and Arthur Penn's "Four Friends." His pure talent set a professional model for the rest of the cast.

"I didn't want to make 'Boogie Nights, Junior,' " said affable Wasson, in Tucson with Atchison to talk about their film.

"The porno distributor couldn't be one of those fat guys with a big cigar," Wasson continued. "I suggested making him more slender," Wasson smiles. "And very professional. Porno films are after all, a billion-dollar business.'

Wasson's read of the Spano character was right on the money.

"We had to make Spano a little tougher in the beginning than Craig wanted," said Atchison. "But that was to make to him more believable at the end when the smooth business guy facade falls away and we see Spano as the manipulative, evil man he really is."

Wasson makes the magic happen, and makes "The Pornographer" a thoughtful extension of the new cinema ground plowed by "Boogie Nights." There are no stock movie stereotypes for this kind of material.

Because "The Pornographer" feels right, feels real, it gains power as a candid look at the kind of people who are in this business. And the kind of outsiders like Paul who find in the porno film world a place where they won't be considered weirdos.

The high point of the film festival's concluding weekend is the arrival of Edward James Olmos to receive the Arizona Independent Film Award April 23 at a 5 p.m. dinner and award night in the historic Stillwell-Twiggs House, 134 S. Fifth Ave. Tickets are $50 couple, $30 single.

For details on specific film times, venues and ticket prices, phone 62-FILMS.

Chuck Graham's e-mail: cgraham@tucsoncitizen.com